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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN UZBEKISTAN: NOTHING WRONG BUT THE
BIG PICTURE

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Elections for Uzbekistan's lower house of Parliament took place on Sunday, December 27. Five election observation teams from the Embassy visited 33 polling stations in Tashkent and the neighboring regions, and concluded that although the elections were not free and fair (no opposition political candidates were on the ballots), on a technical level they ran smoothly. The only significant abnormalities noted were proxy voting and the use of a "mobile ballot box." The Embassy's views align closely with those relayed to us by the head of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Mission. END SUMMARY.

TAKING "TRAINING WHEELS DEMOCRACY" OUT FOR A SPIN

¶2. (SBU) The GOU approach to elections is characterized by the paternalistic assumption that ordinary Uzbek citizens are not ready for real, "no holds barred" democracy. Accordingly, the parliamentary elections are a type of semi-democratic exercise wherein the government strictly limits the "variables" and then allows the elections themselves to proceed with little apparent interference. After first setting very narrow parameters for candidacy and virtually guaranteeing that eventual parliamentarians will fully support the executive branch (if not completely agree with each other), the GOU made the elections themselves as technically correct as possible. For this reason, election observers were welcome to witness the main event, but discouraged from analyzing the political situation in the country in the months before election day. (NOTE: Technically the elections are not over as runoffs will take place in 41 constituencies where no candidate received 50 percent of the vote. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Embassy election observers noted that although the GOU seems to miss the point on the most essential aspects of a democratic society, particularly a free press and robust political dialogue with opposing viewpoints, it tries to make up for its democratic shortcomings by focusing on minute details during the elections themselves. For example, our teams noted each polling station had a first aid room staffed by medical professionals, and a "mother and child" room, stocked with toys, so that parents can comfortably vote without worrying about childcare. Election officials were also proud to show observers their complete array of books and pamphlets addressing the rights and privileges of Uzbek voters, and their collections of newspapers with election coverage and information about the candidates. More importantly, polling station officials generally appeared to be conscientious and committed, if not downright enthusiastic. (One polloff noticed an election chairman removing his own eyeglasses and lending them to an elderly gentleman who was unable to read the ballot.)

THE FAMILY THAT VOTES TOGETHER . . .

¶4. (SBU) The most obvious technical weakness on election day was the widespread practice of allowing a single family member to cast proxy ballots for all of the eligible voters in the family. Evidence of this practice was noted in every polling station that embassy observers visited. In many polling stations, there was not

even an attempt to conceal this "family voting." In full view of embassy teams, a single voter would present multiple passports at the registration point and receive multiple ballots in return. One team observed a single voter stuffing an estimated 30 ballots into the ballot box. In other polling stations, particularly those where most people had already voted, observers looked over the registration lists and noted long series of identical signatures, indicating that a single person had "signed out" numerous ballots. Only in a few polling places did election officials attempt to conceal the evidence of proxy voting by refusing to issue multiple ballots while the embassy's observers were clearly watching.

(COMMENT: Emboffs thought that the voters presenting multiple passports appeared visibly upset not to receive all of "their" ballots, and believe that election officials probably told those voters to come back after the embassy team left. End Comment.) Evidence of proxy voting was still apparent on the registration lists, though election officials at those locations tried to convince embassy observers that very similar handwriting "runs in the family."

¶15. (SBU) Aside from the obvious problem that casting multiple votes is not consistent with international standards of democracy, as well as being illegal under Uzbek election law, ubiquitous proxy voting means that voter turnout statistics are grossly inflated. Based on our observation, we estimate that each person physically present at the polls was casting an average of two to four votes. Even some of the Embassy's local staff admitted that they had allowed (or asked) their family members to vote for them. Thus, it is safe to estimate that the real voter turnout was below fifty

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percent, certainly not the officially reported 88 percent. However, it is possible that more of those absent family members would show up at the polls if the convenient, family-style method of voting was not so widely accepted. Officials clearly felt that achieving a high voter turnout was one of their electoral duties, motivating them to overlook or even endorse a practice that increases their success rate. Each polling station also boasted a "mobile voting box," ostensibly only for the collection of ballots from voters confined to their homes due to illness or disability. However, our teams believe that "door to door" voting services might have been used as another means to boost turnout numbers.

CITY VOTER, COUNTRY VOTER

¶16. (U) During the run-up to election day, opposition websites conducted informal polls in Tashkent that demonstrated Uzbek citizens' utter apathy to the parliamentary elections. And yet, our embassy observation teams viewed a considerable amount of unfeigned enthusiasm on the big day. It is simply not possible to characterize definitively a single Uzbek attitude toward the election process. Some of the discrepancies between those gloomy media reports and our personal impressions may be due to differences between the election situation in urban and rural areas. In general, the urban population is more cynical about the political situation and more apathetic towards the election process. The Embassy's own local staff mostly falls into the latter category; although they are among the most well-informed and politically savvy citizens of Uzbekistan, many of them told us they did not vote at all. On the other hand, emboffs who observed the elections in rural areas noted that many rural citizens seem to be true believers in the Uzbek system.

A CLIMATE OF FEAR, OR A PARTY ATMOSPHERE?

¶17. (SBU) Most impartial international observers, including our teams, have concluded that the parliamentary elections were neither free nor fair. However, press reports which alleged that the elections took place in a climate of fear are exaggerated. In point of fact, there was no need for the government to discourage Uzbeks from voting for the opposition-after all, there were no real opposition candidates on the ballot. (NOTE: The instructions on the ballot clearly stated that if voters either marked multiple candidates or did not mark any of the candidates, the ballot would

not be tallied--so no chance of casting a blank ballot in protest. End Note.) According to our observations, neither was there any particular need for citizens to be coerced into voting. There were many polling stations, so voting was not inconvenient, and for many (particularly in the rural areas), election day seemed to be a social occasion and a welcome break from their routine. Several of the polling stations were playing loud, festive music; one of our teams saw a number of people dancing at the polls. The close-knit neighborhood organizations (mahallahs) were actively involved in the elections, and prominent members of the community were seen to cast their ballots and then nip off for a cup of tea, a plate of plov, or a bowl of stew with members of the election commission. Members of the election commissions (particularly in rural areas) seemed excited to welcome international observers, show off their "mother and child" rooms, and then share their traditional Uzbek hospitality in the form of tea and food.

¶18. (U) Welcoming eighteen-year-old voters also seemed to be a matter of considerable pride at each polling station. The full birth dates of all local residents who were eligible to vote for the first time were posted on the registration lists, and several of the election commissions had planned a special acknowledgement for first-time voters upon registration. One polling station even had small gifts for all young people casting their votes for the first time. Many young voters seemed to be excited to participate in the political process.

¶19. (SBU) Our observation teams did not witness any voter intimidation, and it seems highly unlikely that intimidation tactics are part of the central government's game plan. (As previously noted, the GOU has no need to resort to thuggish behavior against voters, since every candidate on every ballot is a member of a political party that supports the president.) However, it is possible that intimidation, pressure, and possibly other sorts of election fraud may happen within certain electoral districts under the direction of local leaders with a particular interest in the outcome. For example, social pressure to participate in the polls might be applied to constituents in certain districts. Teachers might feel compelled by their supervisors to "volunteer" to assist at the polls. And of course, the previously mentioned technical weaknesses -- family voting and

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the mobile ballot box -- could be exploited on a local level. Before the election, many eligible citizens received text messages on their cell phones reminding them that it is their civic duty to vote. One of our local staff told us that someone called his home on Sunday afternoon to ask why he had not voted yet; he felt that the tone of the call was scolding, but not at all threatening.

OSCE HAS SIMILAR EXPERIENCE

¶10. (SBU) In a post-election meeting with Ambassador Norland, the head of the OSCE Election Assessment Mission Ambassador Jolanda Brunetti described the experiences of the 8-person OSCE team. (NOTE: The OSCE did not deploy a full election observation mission due to its finding that the current political spectrum does not offer a genuine choice between political alternatives. End Note.) The OSCE observers saw family voting at each of the polling stations they visited, as well as occasional failures to check for valid registration cards. Brunetti said she saw this not as bad faith but simply sloppy implementation of Uzbekistan's own laws and procedures. Overall, she said she observed good organizational layout at the polling stations she visited. Although the elections did not meet international standards, Brunetti said progress had been made, particularly in comparison with her experience in Uzbekistan in the 1990s.

COMMENT: HAS ANYTHING CHANGED? WILL ANYTHING CHANGE?

¶11. (SBU) At his local polling station, President Karimov took the opportunity to reiterate to the media that his theory that incremental change is the ideal path to democracy, and he held Uzbekistan up as a model for the rest of the world even while

admitting that Uzbek democracy was still a work in progress. Like many regional leaders, Karimov was spooked by the "Color Revolutions" and seems determined to ensure that no revolutions will ever throw his country into chaos. His policies suggest that he considers stability and security to be among the most desirable characteristics of a political system; his preference for strong, centralized government is a natural byproduct of his Soviet background. While democracy may be a necessary evil, elections present the risk of revolution -- a risk that can be minimized by strictly controlling the variables.

¶12. (SBU) Not surprisingly, given the "evolutionary" political philosophy of its president, Uzbekistan's progress on the road to democracy has been slow -- so slow that the GOU sometimes appears to be moving backwards. However, the political system in Uzbekistan does appear to be evolving, albeit at a glacial pace. Despite the extremely deliberate process, the political parties themselves have shown some encouraging signs of differentiation, and debate over social and economic policy has begun to cautiously enter Uzbekistan's political sphere. For the first time, political parties have begun to criticize each other, and they seem to be gaining confidence in their role as potential shapers of policy. This could be a small but important step. In addition, our observers noted that many young people were present at the polls-not just as voters, but also as officials and political party representatives. Several of them told us that they were proud to be part of the political process and hoped to be candidates themselves some day. As Uzbekistan continues to distance itself from its Soviet past, democratization is possible, even if it will not come quickly.

NORLAND